NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES

SAMPLE APPLICATION NARRATIVE

Fellowships
Literature and Media Studies

National Endowment for the Humanities

Division of Research Programs

Excerpt from a Successful Application

This excerpt from a fellowships application is provided as an example of a funded proposal. It will give you a sense of how a successful application may be crafted. It is not intended to serve as a model. Every application is different, depending on the requirements of the project, the stage of the research, the resources required, and the situation of the applicant. This sample includes only the narrative and the bibliography; it does not include the résumé or letters of recommendation.

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Project Title: Modern British Narrative and the Invention of Modern Propaganda, 1900-1945

Project Director: Mark Wollaeger, Vanderbilt University

Result: *Modernism, Media, Propaganda: British Narrative from 1900 to 1945*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006.

Modern British Narrative and the Invention of Modern Propaganda, 1900-1945

With the support of an NEH Fellowship, I propose to complete a book on the relationship between British modernism and the invention of modern propaganda By situating modern British narrative within the new information culture of the early twentieth century, my project defines a new area of inquiry: the relationship between modernism and the chief information pathology of the age, propaganda. Propaganda has always existed, but modern propaganda, operating through techniques of saturation and multiple media channels, developed contemporaneously with literary modernism. England is particularly important to this history: although all European countries, beginning in World War I, engaged in elaborate propaganda campaigns, the British virtually invented the subtle manipulation of information associated with modern propaganda. Indeed, Joseph Goebbels reportedly modeled the Nazi propaganda machine on the influential British prototype. Through chapters analyzing connections between literature and other cultural forms, my project aims: 1) to map relations between modernist narrative and propaganda from 1900 to the Second World War; 2) to provide the most comprehensive historical account to date of relations between media and the modernist moment; and 3) and to offer fresh readings of major and neglected works. Six chapters and an introduction treat such figures as John Buchan, Joseph Conrad, Ford Madox Ford, Alfred Hitchcock, James Joyce, D. H. Lawrence, George Orwell, Rebecca West, and Virginia Woolf.

Both Victorian and Modernist studies, drawing on new cultural histories, such as Jonathan Crary's *Suspensions of Perception* (1999) and Jonathan Sterne's *The Audible Past* (2003), and borrowing methodologies pioneered in media-specific works, such as James Lastra's *Sound Technology and the American Cinema: Perception, Representation, Modernity* (2000), are being rethought through media studies. But if the relationship between new media and artistic production has begun to attract attention, literary criticism has rarely addressed the cultural effects of the pervasive propaganda that new media made possible. Yet propaganda has played a significant role in British literary history. During World War I, the novelist John Buchan ran the Ministry of Information (MoI); H. G. Wells coordinated the propaganda campaign in Germany; and Joseph Conrad and Ford Madox Ford wrote government propaganda. During the interwar propaganda boom, as the activist rallying cry that "all art is propaganda" contested the resilient claims of aestheticism, the aesthetic was routinely defined against propaganda as its supposed opposite. During World War II, Hitchcock returned to England from Hollywood to make two films for the MoI; E. M. Forster wrote the voice-over for one of Humphrey Jennings propaganda films; and George Orwell, who would anatomize the power of propaganda through the figure of Big Brother, worked as a propagandist for the BBC.

The lack of critical attention may derive from an intuitive (though unconsciously historical) sense that modernism and propaganda must be antithetical in ways that do not require much elaboration. Modernism cultivates difficulty and retreats from a mass audience; propaganda seeks a mass audience through the deceptive transparency of simplification. According to Jacques Ellul, propaganda gives citizens increasingly deprived of traditional forms of support, such as church, family, or village life, precisely what they need: personal involvement in public events and a justification for otherwise useless feelings of anger and resentment. Modernism, in contrast, far from channeling alienation into safely xenophobic forms, tends to elicit resentment by equating civilization with its discontents. History, for Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, is a nightmare from which he is trying to awake.

Yet these antitheses suggest a common cultural logic. If, as Ellul argues, society depends on propaganda to provide the social glue that modernity otherwise tends to dissolve, propaganda simultaneously contributes to the problems it aims to alleviate. Ford spoke for many when he complained in 1911 that the English were "overwhelmed every morning with a white spray of facts" from the newly

dominant popular press, and the alienating effects of information overload were soon exacerbated by photo-journalism and the wireless. Prophetically, Ford felt that excessive factual enumeration was undermining citizenship: with public affairs becoming too complex for the average person to grasp, citizens began to have trouble sorting information from propaganda and became increasingly dependent on specialists. The professional propagandist was one such specialist; the modernist writer another. T. S. Eliot took Joyce as a model because *Ulysses* provided “myths” that gave “a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and chaos which is contemporary history.” When C. F. G. Masterman, who founded the British World War I propaganda campaign, needed consoling myths, he turned to Ford, whose propaganda books redeploy the modernist techniques he perfected earlier that year in *The Good Soldier*.

The peculiar status of facts in modernity helps to illuminate the conjunction of modernism and propaganda. In *A History of the Modern Fact*, Mary Poovey provides a genealogy of how facts came to be conceived as both prior to systematic knowledge -- as raw untheorized data -- and inextricable from the theories they support. Tracing the emergence of this duality to the seventeenth century, Poovey argues that the ambiguity of facts as both preinterpretive and wholly derived from theory is fundamental to modern epistemology. In this context, twentieth-century propaganda looks like a late chapter in the history of the modern fact, for propaganda exploits the internal bifurcation of modern facts by amplifying their rhetorical appeal even while insisting on their value-free neutrality. In its oscillation between heightened forms of subjectivism (e.g., stream of consciousness) and objectivism (e.g., imagism), modernism also explores the epistemological peculiarity of the modern fact.

Neither antithetical nor identical, then, modernism and propaganda have common roots in the rapidly changing media ecology of the early twentieth century. Sometimes the two were agonistic, sometimes allied, sometimes indistinguishable. The intuition that new communications technologies were transforming everyday life even more radically than were new forms of transportation, and the conviction that the era required new principles of order -- aesthetic, social, and political -- were shared by modernists and propagandists alike. Both drew on the new disciplines of depth psychology and sociology, devoted growing attention to unconscious motivation, and sought new forms of order. Even the issue of ambiguity, which (paradoxically enough) might seem to provide a bright line of separation, becomes more complex with the realization that the distinction between information and propaganda first began to erode with the flood of propaganda produced in World War I. Whether by design or not, both the MoI and modernism cultivated ambiguity.

No comprehensive treatment of the relationship between modernism, media, and propaganda exists. Explorations of modernism and media tend to look only at the intersection of two media (e.g., fiction and film), individual works, or a single movement (e.g., Futurism), not at the encompassing welter of cultural pressures exerted by media and propaganda within modernism’s unprecedented cross-fertilization of the arts. Still less has been written on modernism’s relation to propaganda. Drawing on contemporary scholarship on media and propaganda, my study is also informed by some of the founding texts of media studies, such as Walter Lippmann’s *Public Opinion* (1922) and Edward Bernays’s *Crystallizing Public Opinion* (1923), which were themselves written in response to the post-World War I propaganda boom.

A theoretical and historical introduction will include a brief reading of *Heart of Darkness*. Prophetic of the complex entangling of modernism and propaganda in the decades to come, Conrad’s novella locates the collapsing distinction between information and propaganda in Marlow’s ambivalent loyalty to Kurtz, for whom Marlow lies in order to preserve a different order of truth, and whose seductive eloquence, untethered by politics or ethics, prefigures the emergence of the professional propagandist. The next chapter traces the arc of the entire book, which moves from fiction to film, by

rereading Conrad through Hitchcock. Hitchcock's filming of Conrad's *The Secret Agent* (1907) as *Sabotage* (1936) throws into relief Conrad's continuing interest in propaganda and Hitchcock's own investment in the persuasive power of film, which by the end of World War I was recognized as propaganda's most potent medium. The next chapter interprets Woolf's *The Voyage Out* in the context of the golden age of the picture postcard (1895-1914). The fitful emergence of Woolf's dissident modernism finds expression in Rachel Vinrace, who struggles to disengage herself from an informal education that reproduces the cultural politics of colonial postcards and Edwardian exhibitions.

The next three chapters directly engage with World War I propaganda and its aftermath. A chapter on Ford takes up his two propaganda books, *When Blood is Their Argument* and *Between St. Dennis and St. George*, in relation to *The Good Soldier* and argues that Ford's doctrine of impressionism offers a pre-theory of what has come to be called spin: by fusing facts and human feeling in the impression, Ford aims to reinvest "dead facts" with coherent value, but in doing so his theory embraces the subtle subjectification of history on which propaganda depends. The next chapter studies modernism and state-sponsored manipulations of information by analyzing the ways in which *Ulysses* engages with the rising political and aesthetic influence of the poster: decomposing notions of Irish national identity propagated by British recruiting posters distributed in Ireland, Joyce invents new forms of cosmopolitan subjectivity in response to nationalizing discourses of propaganda. The last chapter in this section reads D. H. Lawrence's *Women in Love* (1920) as an attempt to articulate a utopian space for fiction within what Walter Lippmann called the "pseudo-environment" of mediated images produced by World War I propaganda.

The project closes by showing how modernism re-emerges from within British propaganda in Hitchcock's two World War II propaganda films. Momentarily released from the constraints of the Hollywood studio system, Hitchcock used the space provided by the MoI to explore cinematic experiments suggested a few years earlier by Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane*, a film deeply engaged with forms of propaganda made possible by the cultural ascendancy of film and the enduring influence of the popular press. Studying Welles and Hitchcock against the backdrop of increasingly pervasive cinematic propaganda in the 1930s, this epilogic treatment reflects on modernism's capacity to intervene effectively in a media environment in which the distinction between information and propaganda seems to have been entirely erased.

In its focus on techniques of persuasion, the proejct explores the flip side of my first book, *Joseph Conrad and the Fictions of Skepticism*, and it deepens and extends the historicizing project of my edited volume, *Joyce and the Subject of History*. Discussing major works and bringing together modernism and the new media studies, this book will interest readers not only in modernism, war literature, and literary theory but also those engaged in new interdisciplinary approaches to media, art, and literature. It will also stand out from other efforts to rethink the cultural bearings of modernism owing to its commitment to integrating close reading and historical contextualization. Versions of three chapters have already been published as articles; research for the introduction and the remaining three chapters (two of which have been drafted) is nearly complete.

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